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***Hippolais* warblers apparently breeding on the north Somalia coast**

by *J.S.Ash & D.J.Pearson*

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In May 1979 JSA and J.E.Miskell found two intriguing species of warblers in trees near the north-west Somalia coast. One was an *Acrocephalus* with a wing formula like that of the African Reed Warbler *A. baeticatus*, the other a small *Hippolais*. In

the following May, these observers found the same two species in north and north-east Somalia, singing in coastal mangroves. Examination of specimens of the *Acrocephalus* warbler, together with similar birds collected from the Red Sea coasts of Eritrea, Sudan and Arabia, resulted in the naming of a new taxon, *A.[baeticatus] avicenniae* (Ash *et al.* 1989), soon shown to be widely present in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden mangroves. The *Hippolais* warblers were also thought to be a locally breeding form, for examples collected all had enlarged gonads. They were treated by Ash & Miskell (1998) under Olivaceous Warbler *H. pallida*, but further study and comparisons were required.

We have recently re-examined the 1979-80 specimens and compared them carefully with other small brown or greyish-brown *Hippolais* forms. We have investigated reports of similar warblers elsewhere on the southern Red Sea and north Somalia coasts, and have located a specimen from Eritrea which appears to be the same as the Somalia mangrove birds.

Observations in Somalia 1979-1980

In 1979, *Hippolais* warblers were first found singing on 8 May in the tops of *Tamarix* trees in a dry wadi 6 km north-east of Giriyaad (10°51'N, 43°16'E), within 30 km of the sea. One bird was netted and collected. From 9-12 May, several more were singing in tall *Acacia*, *Tamarix* and *Conocarpus* trees in irrigated gardens at Takoshe (11°21'N, 43°25'E), near Zeila.

In 1980, observations were made further east at Alula (11°58'N, 50°46'E) on 2-3 May. Many warblers were singing in mangroves round a coastal lagoon 1 km east of the town. The situation was confused by the presence of several migrants (Marsh Warbler *A. palustris* and Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* identified with certainty), but the bulk of the song came from two species, a pale brown *Acrocephalus*, later to be described as the Mangrove Reed Warbler *A. (baeticatus) avicenniae* and a somewhat greyer *Hippolais*. The *Hippolais* had a tinge of brownness above and were pale below, with long pale supercilia, sagittate bills and no trace of pale wing panels; they lacked the tail or wing-flicking typical of *H. pallida elaeica* or Upcher's Warbler *H. languida*. They sang rather like *elaieica* but with frequent paired notes reminiscent of *A. scirpaceus*. On 6 May, nets erected in the mangroves at dawn quickly caught six birds, consisting of one *A. palustris*, two *A. [b.] avicenniae* and three of the unidentified *Hippolais*. These last were collected and their gonads were found to be much enlarged. They were in worn plumage like the *avicenniae* and were very similar in size and wing-length, but were greyer, with broader bills, yellower (less orange) mouths, browner (less greyish) legs without yellow on the soles, squarer tails and shorter undertail-coverts. Their wing structure was similar to that of the *avicenniae* although the first primary was much longer (Table 1). They were certainly not *H. p. elaeica*, a form which overwinters commonly in north-east Africa. Indeed, in wing length and wing formula they showed a much closer resemblance to Sykes's Warbler *H. rama*.

A few days later, on 8 May, three more warblers were found in intense early afternoon heat in a small patch of degraded mangroves at the mouth of the Garas Wadi (11°15'N, 40°02'E), 17 km west of Bosaso. These were again greyish birds with pale brown legs, no wing- or tail-flicking and no wing panel. They had the same *Hippolais*-type song as the Alula birds and were presumed to be of the same form.

The four *Hippolais* specimens from 1979-80 are now housed in the Smithsonian Institution collection, Washington, DC, USA (Reg. Nos. 571271, 571272, 571275, 571365).

Other reports and specimens from the Red Sea, Somalia and north-east Arabia

The following *Hippolais* are probably all of the same form as the birds in the Somalia mangroves: a) four January to April specimens from the Eritrean coast listed as *rama* by Zedlitz (1910-1911) on page 71, but which he later (pages 611-612) decided were *H. pallida*; b) a fresh-plumaged bird collected by K. D. Smith while singing in mangroves at Arafale (15°05'N, 39°45'E), Eritrea, on 5 November 1951, labelled as *H. pallida elaeica* and examined by us in the Tring collection (Reg. No. 1952.4.7); c) a moulting bird netted in mangroves, examined in detail and released at Ras Siyan (12°29'N, 43°19'E), Djibouti, on 18 October 1985 (Welch & Welch 1986).

We have examined a specimen from the AMNH collection (Reg. No. 595191) taken on 20 February 1919 at Berbera (10°26'N, 45°00' E), north Somalia, by G. F. Archer, which was initially labelled *H. pallida* but then re-identified by Meinertzhagen as *rama* (Archer & Godman 1961). This may well be *H. p. elaeica*, but some wing formula details are unusual (see Table 1). We have also examined two worn *Hippolais* in the Tring collection from coastal sites in the United Arab Emirates: a) a bird collected at Khor Khalba (25°01'N, 56°22'E) in Sharjah on 24 March 1971 by M.D.Gallagher, and identified as *H.(caligata) rama* (Reg. No. 1977.18.27); b) a male with enlarged testes, collected by Gallagher while singing in mangroves at Ras al Khaimah (c. 25°57'N, 56°03'E) on 16 June 1972, and labelled *H. pallida elaeica* (Reg. No. 1972.6.5). We consider that both of these belong to *H. rama* (see below and Table 1), and they resemble the Somalia specimens very closely.

Details and Comparisons of Specimens

Measurements and wing formula details of the four Somalia specimens are given in Table 1. We have compared them carefully at Tring (see Table 2) with five small *Hippolais* forms: *H. pallida elaeica* of SE Europe and SW Asia (which winters in NE and E Africa); *H. p. pallida* of Egypt (which migrates to the Sudan); *H. p. laeneni* of the southern Sahara; *H. rama* of central Asia (which winters from India to Arabia); and *H. caligata* of W Russia and N central Asia (which also winters in India).

The Somalia birds are all in worn, rather faded plumage. They are uniform dull greyish brown above, similar to *elaieca* in the same state of plumage, but slightly

darker and less grey. They are darker (much less buffy or ochreous) than nominate *pallida* or *laeneni*. They match worn *rama* closely, but lack the olive tones of *caligata*. Pale fringes near the tips of the outer tail feathers have been practically lost, but feather wear is not so extreme as to seriously affect comparisons of measurements and wing formula with those of other taxa. In wing-length the Somalia birds fall below the range of *elaeica* and average less than *pallida*, but agree closely with the other three forms. They have a mean tail/wing ratio of 81 %, higher than in *elaeica* or *caligata* but somewhat lower than in *rama*. But note that tail measurement in these worn birds was probably reduced by 1-2 mm. Bill shape resembles that of *rama*, *elaeica*, *pallida* and *laeneni*, rather broad-based and with straight or marginally concave sides (differing from the more markedly concave-sided, finer-tipped bill of *caligata*). In length and width, bills agree most closely with *rama*, averaging slightly narrower than in *elaeica* and *pallida*, but larger than in *caligata*.

Wing structure is characterised by a short primary extension, with distances from 6th primary tip to wing tip and 10th primary tip to wing tip much less than in *elaeica*, and matching *rama* and *laeneni*. There are some subtle differences from *rama*

TABLE 1

Measurements and wing structure of *Hippolais* specimens from Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates

Country Locality	Somalia Giriyaad	Somalia Alula	Somalia Alula	Somalia Alula	Eritrea Arafale	UAE Khalba	UAE Ras al Khaimah	Djibouti Ras Sayan	Somalia Berbera
Date	8.v.79	5.v.80	5.v.80	5.v.80	5.xi.51	24.iii.71	16.vi.72	18.x.85	20.ii.19
Sex	F	M	F	M	?	M?	M	?	F
Wing	60	62	58	62	59	59	61	62	64
Tail	47	50	49	50	49	52	52	-	51
Bill length *	15	16	15	15.5	16	14.5	15.5	15	16
Bill width**	3.8	3.8	4.0	4.2	4.2	4.0	4.2	3.5	4.2
Tarsus	20	21	20.5	20	20	21.5	21	-	20
Longest p.	3-4	3-4	3-4	3-4	3-5	3-4	3-4	3-4	3-4
p2 = p?	6/7	7	7	6/7	7	8/9	7/8	7	7/8
p2 < wing tip	4.5	5.5	5	6	4.5	6.5	5.5	5	7
p6 < wing tip	3.5	3.5	3	4	2.5	1.5	2	3	4
p10 < wing tip	9	11	9	11	9	9	9.5	-	10.5
ss < wing tip	9.5	12	10	11	-	-	-	-	-
p1 > pc	7	6	4.5	5.5	7	6.5	8	8	2
p2 > p1	25	28	26.5	27.5	25	24	24	-	30
Emarginated pp	3-5	3-5	3-5	3-5	3-5	3-6	3-6	3-5	3-5
Gonads (mm)	1,5	7 x 6	5 x 5	7 x 6.5			large		
Weight (g)	9.3	10.4	10.5	9.9				9.1	
Museum	USNM	USNM	USNM	USNM	Tring	Tring	Tring	-	AMNH
Reg. No.	571275	571272	571365	571271	1952.4.7	1977.18.27	1972.6.5	-	595191
Collected by	JSA/JEM	JSA/JEM	JSA/JEM	JSA/JEM	Smith	Gallagher	Gallagher	Denton	Archer

TABLE 2

Measurements (mm) and wing formula details of the mangrove *Hippolais* of N Somalia compared with those of various small *Hippolais* forms. Measurements are given for the number of birds indicated, as (mean) range or range only. Equal numbers of MM and FF were included in comparison samples.

	N Somalia coast birds <i>elaeica</i>		<i>pallida</i>	<i>laeneni</i>	<i>caligata</i>	<i>rama</i>	UAE coast birds
Number measured	4	10	10	12	10	20	2
Wing	(60.5) 58-62	(65.5) 62-69	(63.0) 60-66	(61.8) 59-65	(60.2) 58-64	(60.7) 57-64	59, 61
Tail	(49.0) 47-50	(51.3) 48-56	(49.5) 48-52	(50.4) 47-53	(47.5) 45-50	(52.2) 47-56	52, 52
Mean tail/wing ratio (%)	(81.0)	(78.3)	(78.6)	(81.6)	(78.9)	(86.0)	(85.8)
Tarsus	(20.4) 20-21	(21.2) 20-22.5	(21.2) 20.5-22.5	(20.5) 19.5-21.5	(19.7) 19-20.5	(20.4) 20-21	21, 21.5
Bill length	(15.4) 15-16	(15.7) 15-17	(15.6) 15-16.5	(15.0)* 14.5-15.5	(13.3) 12.5-14	(14.8) 14-15.5	14.5, 15.5
Bill width	(3.9) 3.8-4.2	(4.4) 4.2-4.8	(4.4) 4.0-5.0	(4.3)** 4.2-4.6	(3.7) 3.4-4.0	(4.0) 3.6-4.2	4.0, 4.2
p2 = p?	6/7-7	5/6-7	6/7-7/8	6/7-8	6-7/8	6/7-8/9	7/8, 8/9
p2 < wing tip	4.5-6	3-6	3.5-6.5	4-7.5	4-6	4.5-8	5.5, 6.5
p6 < wing tip	3-4	2.5-4.5	1.5-3.5	1.5-3	1-2.5	1-2.5	1.5, 2
p10 < wing tip	9-11	11-14.5	9.5-12	9.5-12	9.5-11	8-10.5	9, 9.5
p1 > pc	4.5-7	3-6.5	5-8.5	4.5-8	3-8	4.5-8	6.5, 8
Number with p6 emarginated	0/4	1/10	4/10	4/12	5/10	16/20	2/2

*n = 10, ** n = 9

In order to achieve a degree of standardisation all measurements were taken or retaken by DJP at the Natural History Museum, Tring.

however: the second primary is equal to or longer than the 7th (in *rama* it is usually shorter) and there is no distinct emargination on the 6th primary (a feature of most *rama*). In wing structure detail, the Somali birds in fact agree more precisely with *laeneni* than with *rama*.

Also given in Table 1 are details of the specimens from the Red Sea and eastern Arabia, and of Archer's Berbera bird. The November bird from Eritrean mangroves is in fresh plumage. It is certainly not *elaeica* and has a much shorter wing. Like *rama* it has brownish-white fringes around the distal part of the outermost tail feathers which merge with the darker centres (less well demarcated than the whitish edges at the tips of the outer tail feathers of *elaeica*), and has narrower and less conspicuous pale fringes to the outer edges and tips of the secondaries and tertiaries than fresh-plumaged *elaeica*, *pallida* or *laeneni*. But it seems to be a little greyer than freshly moulted *rama* from India, and its wing formula details (2nd primary equal to the 7th and 6th without emargination) would place it with the Somalia birds rather than as a wintering migrant *rama* from Asia. It should be noted that Smith (1957) reported *Hippolais* warblers (which he assumed to be *elaeica*) as possibly resident and singing commonly in Eritrean mangroves in mid-May, and Laurent (1990) refers to *H. pallida* as being "very common and breeding in March-April" in Djibouti. The bird caught in October in Djibouti mangroves was moulting, with the inner six primaries and

some of the tail feathers new. Its measurements and wing formula match those of the Somalia and Eritrea specimens.

Archer's Berbera bird is not badly worn, but has feathers broken or missing in both wings, and one half of the tail missing. Sexed female, its wing length of 64 mm and its other measurements would place it as *elaeica*, which it matches well in plumage colour. However, it has an unusually short second primary (between 7th and 8th) and a short 10th primary shortfall (10.5 mm) which fit better with the measurements of the mangrove birds. It is difficult to place this bird with certainty. The two worn Tring specimens from the United Arab Emirates match *rama* in tail length (tail/wing ratio 86%) and wing formula (2nd primary shorter than 7th, 6th primary emarginated). They can confidently be assigned to this form, which is recorded as an uncommon local migrant and possible breeder in mangroves on the Batinah coast (Cramp 1993, Eriksen & Sargeant 2000). Note however that but for the small wing formula difference and their slightly longer tails these individuals could have been considered identical to the Somalia mangrove series.

Conclusions

To judge from their territorial behaviour and their enlarged gonads, the *Hippolais* present during May in the north Somalia mangroves represent a local breeding form, with which we would associate the specimens from Eritrea and Djibouti. It is still uncertain whether these birds belong under *H. pallida* or *H. rama*, and further work is required on their song and behaviour. They are quite distinct from the larger, longer-winged *H. pallida elaeica*, and the much more buff and also longer-winged *H. p. pallida*. Although they match *H. p. laeneni* in size and structure they are quite different in colour. Their resemblance to *H. rama* is striking, and they differ only in minor details of wing formula and in their slightly shorter tails. A resident north-east African population of *rama* would be expected to be shorter-winged with a shorter second primary and a higher tail/wing ratio than migrant birds breeding in Asia. In the Red Sea/ Somalia birds, however, the second primary is longer than in Asian *rama* and the tail/wing ratio appears to be slightly lower.

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More on Boyd Alexander's types from Lake Chad

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Boyd Alexander collected eleven new avian taxa when he visited Lake Chad in 1904-05. Dowsett & Moore (1997) clarified the type localities of two of these (Lesser Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus gracilirostris neglectus* and Greater Swamp Warbler *A. rufescens chadensis*). It is useful now to examine the remaining nine. Coordinates are given for localities not in the gazetteer of Elgood *et al.* (1994).

The following three races were described simply from "Lake Chad", with no other locality indicated:

Caprimulgus natalensis chadensis Alexander 1908 *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 21: 90. Natal Nightjar.

No date was given originally, but the type was collected 30 April 1905 — date on label per Warren (1966), where the locality is given as Kowa Baga (13°07'N, 13°52'E), thus in Nigeria.

Erythropygia galactotes oliviae (Alexander 1908 *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 23: 15). Rufous Bush Chat.

Collected 21 November 1904, and Warren & Harrison (1971) give locality on label as near Yo, thus in Nigeria.